



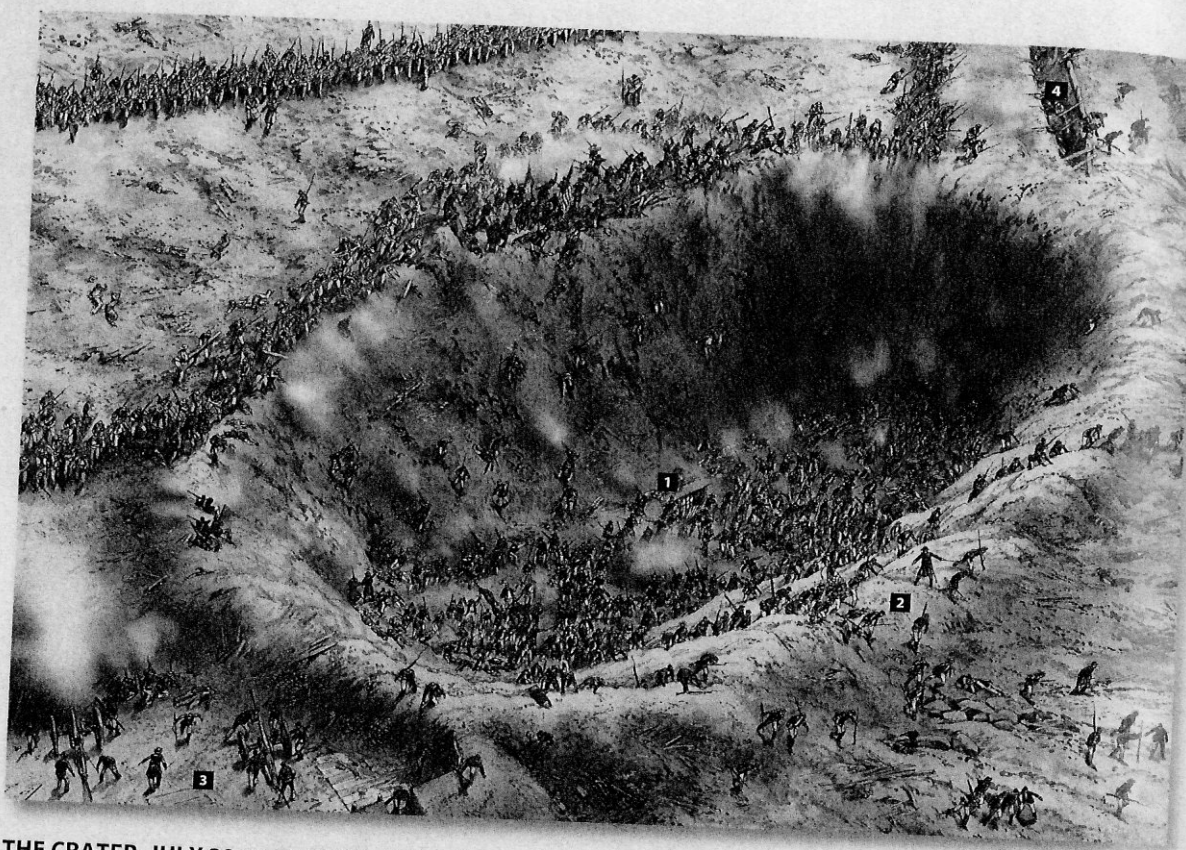
Based on an oil painting by John Elder, which was commissioned by William Mahone in 1869, this steel plate engraving depicts the 12th Virginia leading the charge into the Crater during the Confederate counterattack. The staff of the battle flag carried by this regiment was snapped in two during this action, but was quickly spliced back together with a ramrod and planted on the earthworks after the Confederates had reclaimed what remained of Elliott's Salient. (*Battles & Leaders*)

colors." However, the toll on officers and men was great. Colonel Delevan Bates, commanding the 13th USCT, fell shot through the face at the head of his regiment, for which he received a posthumous Medal of Honor. Major James C. Leeke, of the same regiment, stood on the ramparts urging his men forward with blood from a chest wound gushing from his mouth.

Colonel Henry G. Thomas, leading the Second Brigade, reported: "The instant I reached the First Brigade I attempted to charge, but the Thirty-first was disheartened at its loss of officers and could not be gotten out promptly. Captain [Marshall L.] Dempsey and Lieutenant [Christopher] Pennell and myself then attempted to lead them, but the fire was so hot that half the few who came out of the works were shot. Here Lieutenant Pennell was killed and riddled through and through. He died with the flag in his hand, doing everything an officer could do to lead on the men ... Immediately after this I was ordered by Brigadier General Ferrero to advance in concert with Colonel Sigfried and take the crest. I ordered the Twenty-ninth this time to lead, which it did gallantly, closely followed by the Twenty-eighth and a few of the Twenty-third, when it was at once engaged by a heavy charging column of the enemy, and after a struggle driven back over our rifle-pits. At this moment a panic commenced. The black and white troops came pouring back together. A few, more gallant, than the rest, without organization, but guided by a soldier's instinct, remained on the side of the pits nearest our line and held the enemy at bay some ten or fifteen minutes, until they were nearly all shot away ... Whether we fought well or not, the scores of our dead lying thick as if mowed down by the hand of some mighty reaper and the terrible loss of officers can best attest."

## THE CONFEDERATE COUNTERATTACK

In his headquarters at Dunn's Hill, Robert E. Lee was alerted to the desperate situation caused by the detonation of the Union mine by a staff officer sent by Beauregard, who had been awakened by the explosion in Petersburg. Lee immediately gave orders for two brigades of Anderson's division, 3rd Corps, commanded by Brigadier General William "Little Billy" Mahone, to reinforce Johnson's reeling troops. Posted at the Wilcox Farm near Lieutenant Creek



**THE CRATER, JULY 30, 1864 (PP 54–55)**

Toward the end of the hideous struggle in and around the Crater on July 30, 1864, Lee ordered two brigades of Anderson's division, under Brigadier General William "Little Billy" Mahone, to counterattack. The slaughter that ensued resulted in a defeat for the Union Army that cost 3,798 killed, wounded and missing of a total of 20,708 engaged in the mine assault. Confederate casualties probably amounted to about 1,500.

The Confederate counterattack is seen here moving in from the west. The Virginians formed the first wave, and the North Carolinians the second. As the Confederates prepared to charge, Lieutenant Colonel John A. Bross (1), 29th USCT, rose up and, waving the regimental colors, urged his black troops on yelling, "Forward, my brave boys!" Inevitably, Bross was cut down before the remnants of his regiment could scramble out of the Crater.

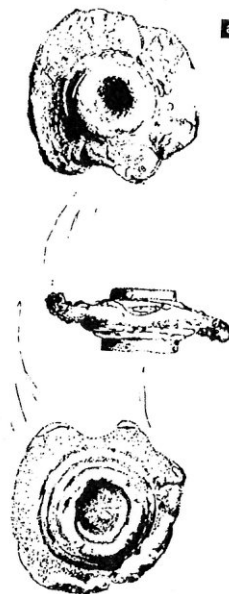
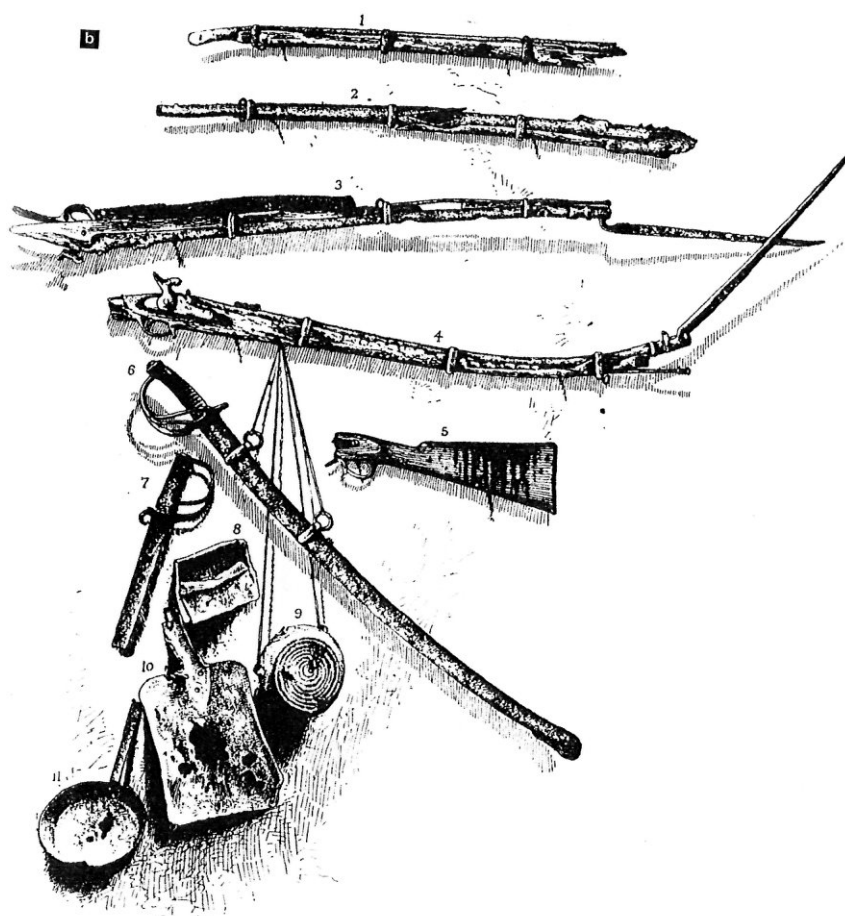
The Confederates yelled "No quarter!" as they went in with fixed bayonets. At the moment they began their charge, the Union commanders in the Crater and nearby trenches received orders to retreat (2), and had begun passing the order along the line as best they could. Hence, the battle-shocked Union troops offered only token resistance when the Confederates closed on them. Reaching the edge of the Crater, many Confederates fired at pointblank range while others hurled clods of earth, wood, discharged muskets, and loose cannonballs down at the terrified Union troops.

Captain John C. Featherston, Company F, 9th Alabama, observed, "There were quite a number of abandoned muskets with bayonets on them lying on the ground around the fort. Our men began pitching them over the embankment, bayonet foremost, trying to harpoon the men inside."

The presence of African-Americans incensed the Confederates. According to Featherston, "The enemy shrank back, and the death grapple continued until most of the Yankees found in there were killed. This slaughter would not have been so great had not our men found negro soldiers in the fort with the whites. This was the first time we had met negro troops, and the men were enraged at them for being there and at the whites for having them there." Many black troops were shot and bayoneted as they tried to surrender. Others were killed by their white Union comrades for fear of being murdered by the Confederates if caught with African-American soldiers.

Not all the Union troops were phased by the surrounding chaos. A detachment of the 14th New York Artillery under Sergeant Wesley Stanley, Company D seized the two Confederate cannon remaining after the explosion and turned them on their assailants to the south (3). Other groups of men began to dig in. Armed with Model 1860 Spencer repeating rifles, Company K, 57th Massachusetts, commanded by Captain Benjamin A. Spear, also harassed the enemy artillery in their front (4).





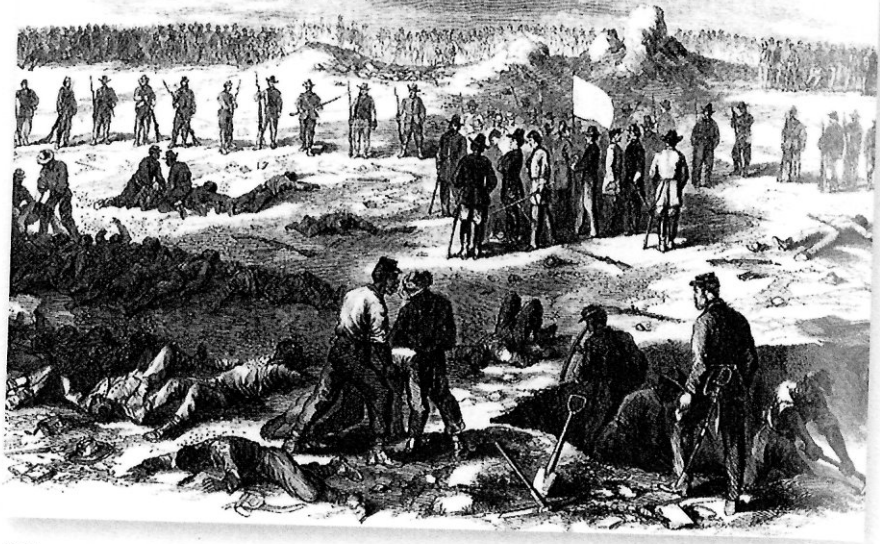
Established in 1865 by local resident William H. Griffith, whose house on the Jerusalem Plank Road was destroyed, the first museum dedicated to the Petersburg campaign contained some remarkable relics that illustrated the ferocious nature of the fighting in and around the Crater. (a) Front and rear view of two musket balls which met point to point. (b) 1. Musket barrel with a bullet hole at the muzzle. 2. Musket burst by two bullets meeting in the barrel, a bullet having entered the muzzle as the gun was discharged. 3. Musket struck by six bullets, one embedding itself in the barrel near the bayonet. 4. Musket bent after having been cocked and capped. 5. Musket stock covered with blood, found in a bombproof. 6. Sword found in a bombproof. 7. Broken sword. 8. Lining of cartridge box. 9. Canteen perforated by bullets. 10. Shovel having bullet holes, found on the Union picket line in front of the Crater. 11. Frying pan having bullet holes; taken out of the Crater. (*Battles & Leaders*)

two miles south of the crater, Mahone responded promptly at about 6 a.m. Choosing a circuitous route following ravines that concealed them as much as possible from observation by Union signal towers, he marched David Weisiger's Virginia brigade, and Wright's Georgia brigade, under Colonel Matthew R. Hall, toward the fighting. Reaching a ravine close by the Crater, Weisiger's brigade was ordered to lay down ready for the assault with the 6th, 16th, 61st, 41st and 12th Virginia posted from right to left. Hall's Georgians took up a similar position to the north.

As they waited for all units to arrive in position, Mahone and Weisiger observed that the Union forces occupying the rim of the Crater to their front were preparing to advance. Indeed, Lieutenant Colonel John A. Bross, 29th USCT, raised himself up and, waving the regimental colours, urged his men on yelling, "Forward, my brave boys!" At the same time Major William H. Etheredge, commanding the 41st Virginia, thought he heard the order, "Fix bayonets and no quarter" being passed along the Union line. Inevitably, Bross was cut down before the remnants of his regiment could scramble out of the Crater. However, the threat of this attack prompted the Virginians, followed by the 17th, 26th and 61st North Carolina who had formed up in their rear, to rise up and charge, yelling "no quarter" as they went in with the bayonet.

Fleeing in the face of such force, the African-Americans piled back into the crater and the trenches to its north. Captain Clark, 115th New York, recalled,

On request of General Butler, a truce was organized to bury the dead for four hours, from 5 a.m., on August 1, 1864. The report accompanying this *Frank Leslie's* engraving stated, "The bodies, after lying in a midsummer sun for two days, were terribly altered; swarms of flies gathered around these remains of the gallant fellows that fell. The rebel works swarmed with men, and in front was a line of guards. In the intervening space, between this and our line, the men were busily at work, committing to earth the remains of their comrades. Near the guards our officers met rebel officers at the flag." (Author's collection)



"The mass of the Union army are swept back like a breath of air, and are cut up badly on the backward track." Finding little sanctuary, both black and white Union troops now became so packed that they found it impossible to lift their arms or weapons to defend themselves.

Confederate Major Etheredge recorded, "we pushed to the front, and reaching the ditch, in we went with empty muskets, depending on the bayonet and breech of the gun, and a regular hand to hand encounter took place. The scene that follows beggars description: our men would drive the bayonet into one man, pull it out, turn and butt and knock the brains out of another, and so on until the ditch ran with blood of the dead and dying. So great was the slaughter that Lieutenant Colonel William H. Seward, of the Sixty-first regiment, in command, and myself ... had to make a detail [of men] to pile up the dead on the side of the ditch to make room so we could reinforce to the right or left, as occasion might require."

The Georgia brigade under Hall did not fare so well. Ordered to maneuver from their position north of the crater in order to attack the Union forces occupying that part of the salient not damaged by the mine explosion, they encountered stiff resistance from the remains of the First Brigade, Third Division, under Brigadier General John F. Hartranft, supported by the two captured Confederate cannon manned by Sergeant Stanley's New Yorkers. Other Union artillery added to the Northern firepower, which completely overwhelmed the Georgians and drove them back in utter confusion.

Nonetheless, by 9 a.m. Burnside realized the whole Union attack was a failure. Besides the carnage taking place in the Crater, supporting troops in the captured trenches to its north, including the 97th Pennsylvania, were running out of ammunition and were ordered to withdraw as best they could. Meanwhile, Mahone made preparations to wipe out the last Union resistance in the Crater by ordering the brigade of Georgians under Brigadier General John C.C. Sanders to attack. Appearing before these troops prior to the assault, Mahone advised them that General Lee himself would be watching their progress from the Gee House near the Jerusalem Plank Road. With fatal results, he added that African-American troops were in the Crater and that they should

be given "no quarter." Officers were informed that the attack would take place at 2 p.m., and that two guns would be fired as a signal to charge.

Confederate artillery drew fire from the Union guns as much as possible, and then fell silent minutes before the attack began. On the sound of the signal guns, Sander's brigade rose up and advanced with shouldered arms. Captain John C. Featherston, Company F, 9th Alabama, recalled, "When we came within range we saw the flash of the sunlight on the enemy's guns as they were levelled above the walls of the wrecked fort. Then came a stream of fire and the awful roar of battle. This volley seemed to awaken the demons of hell, and appeared to be the signal for everybody within range of the fort to commence firing. We raised a yell and made a dash in order to get under the walls of the fort before their artillery could open upon us, but in this we were unsuccessful. The air seemed literally filled with missiles."

At the moment the Alabamians began their charge, the Union commanders in the Crater and nearby trenches received orders to retreat, and had begun passing the order along the line as best they could. Hence, the totally battle-shocked Northern troops offered only token resistance when the Confederates closed on them. Reaching the edge of the Crater, many fired at pointblank range while others hurled clods of earth, wood, discharged muskets, and loose cannonballs down at the terrified Union troops. Captain Featherston observed, "There were quite a number of abandoned muskets with bayonets on them lying on the ground around the fort. Our men began pitching them over the embankment, bayonet foremost, trying to harpoon the men inside."

Finally, by about 4.40 p.m. the bloodbath became too much for all, and a Confederate officer yelled out to a Union colonel nearby, "Why in hell don't you surrender?" To which the Yankee colonel replied, "Why in hell don't you let us!" At this point the remaining Union troops began to throw down their arms, and a Rebel captain urged his men to stop the violence shouting, "Hold on there; they have surrendered." The failed assault had cost the Union army 3,798 out of 20,708 troops involved. The Confederates had an estimated 11,466 men engaged. Casualties in Johnson's division (and Colquitt's brigade) were 1,182, while losses in Mahone's division, plus the 61st North Carolina, were not recorded. However, total Confederate casualties were approximately 1,500. After a 17-day court of enquiry in September 1864, Burnside was found "answerable for the want of success" of the assault following the mine explosion at Petersburg. After giving his testimony to the court, he went on a 20-day leave. On September 1, 1864 he received a dispatch from Grant instructing him not to return and John G. Parke took command of the IX Corps. Burnside finally resigned his commission on April 15, 1865 – two days after the surrender of Lee at Appomattox.

For sheltering in a bombproof while their brigades were in "difficulty in the crater," both generals Ledlie and Ferrero also bore the blame for the failure of the mine assault. The former officer resigned his commission on January 23, 1865 and returned to civil engineering. The latter remained in command for the duration, being breveted a major general of US volunteers on December 2, 1864. In his report to Chief of Staff Major General Henry W. Halleck, Grant stated: "It was the saddest affair I have witnessed in the war. Such opportunity for carrying fortifications I have never seen, and do not expect again to have." The grandson of President John Quincy Adams and commanding the African-American 5th Massachusetts Cavalry at Petersburg, Major Charles F. Adams best summed up the disastrous battle of the Crater as follows: "It was agreed that the thing was a perfect success, except that it did not succeed."